

New Trends in the Study of Byzantine Historiography

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In the course of every intellectual endeavor, it is advisable sometimes to stop and look down the road we have traveled and try to imagine what lies ahead. The present paper is not a book review, still less an attempt to praise or criticize the books and articles written about Byzantine historiography in recent years; my task is merely to try to isolate significant trends in Byzantine studies. Some years ago I published an article with a similar title in *Klio*,¹ but the similarity of titles does not necessarily mean similarity in content.

Much work has been done in recent years in the study of Byzantine historiography. When the first volume of *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* appeared in 1967, most scholars thought it would take a century to replace the famous Bonn Corpus. Now, however, the end of the enterprise is around the corner. Over the last decades many works have appeared dealing with the personalities of historians and the peculiarities of their writings, not to mention the treatment of these compositions as historical sources. Of great importance is the fact that some scholars learned not only to draw factual evidence from historical works, but also to extract from them “indirect” information—the sort of information medieval writers did not realize they possessed!² But this is of relatively little interest for our purposes. Historiography will be regarded here chiefly as a phenomenon of cultural history and as a literary genre.

Some of the current issues in Byzantine historiography are rather old and traditional; others have appeared recently. We shall begin with the first ones, specifically the problem of the classical tradition in historiography.

The constant application of the well-tried methods of classical philology and especially *Quellenforschung* to the historical writings of the Byzantines revealed already in the nineteenth century the close dependence of Byzantine writers on their ancient Greek forerunners. Since classical background was being discovered almost everywhere (far more in histories than in chronicles), detecting ancient models in any work became a goal of sorts and most scholars came to the conclusion that Byzantine historiography is a direct continuation of the classical one. It is not difficult to find dozens of such assertions, but I need refer only to the article by G. Moravcsik with the significant title,

¹Ja. Ljubarskij, “Neue Tendenzen in der Erforschung der byzantinischen Historiographie,” *Klio* 69.2 (1987), 560–66.

²A. Kazhdan and G. Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium* (Washington, D.C., 1982).

"Klassizismus in der byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung."³ Moravcsik's main conclusion is that Byzantine historiography is a "geradelinige Fortsetzung der antiken." The search for a classical background even led some scholars to reconstruct lost or imaginary pieces of literature as presupposed models for extant Byzantine historiographical compositions. Such was the case, for instance, with R. Jenkins, who saw in the Continuator of Theophanes' story of Michael III an imitation of Plutarch's lost biography of Nero.⁴

As often happens, after the trend reached its climax opposing viewpoints appeared, and some scholars tried to verify, limit, and/or reject the extremes of the theory. So, four years after the publication of Moravcsik's article, H. Hunger successfully demonstrated that the dependence of Byzantine historical writings on classical patterns by no means prevented them from being trustworthy historical sources.⁵ Supporting this statement, Hunger showed that historical events narrated by Byzantine authors in terms and phrases and even with details borrowed from antiquity really took place because they were recorded by other writers. In a more recent paper devoted to John Kantakouzenos,⁶ Hunger goes still further, asserting that the similarity between Kantakouzenos and Thucydides (his model) was limited to the language, and that the imitation of classical models was for the Byzantines merely a sort of "intellektuelle Gesellschafts-spiel."

So Byzantine historical writings regained their trustworthiness, but the problem of the "imitation of antiquity" remained because Byzantine historiography was not merely a collection of pieces of evidence, but a cultural phenomenon in need of explanation. This task is much more difficult, and most scholars have failed to comprehend why the world outlook, mentality, and literary methods of Byzantine historians imitating their classical predecessors had in reality very little in common with those of their models (I do not mean, of course, such obvious things as the difference between Christian and pagan concepts).

This fact is really much easier to appreciate by instinct than to comprehend intellectually, and not many scholars have tried to do it. Among them I would like to mention only one, partly because the title of his paper corresponds to that of Moravcsik mentioned above: the Australian scholar R. Scott and his paper "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography."⁷ In contrast to the Hungarian Byzantinist, Scott argued that classical historiography ceased to exist in the sixth century and was never restored in the Byzantine period. Unlike Hunger, Scott was not concerned with verifying the historical events narrated by Byzantine writers, but tried to demonstrate the differences between Byzantine authors with respect to their approaches to narration and their methods and concepts of history. Scott chose as an example Anna Comnena, arguing

³Gy. Moravcsik, "Klassizismus in der byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung," in *Polychronion, Festschrift F. Dölger* (Heidelberg, 1966), 366–77.

⁴R. Jenkins, "The Classical Background of the Scriptores post Theophanem," *DOP* 8 (1954), 11–30.

⁵H. Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature," *DOP* 23/24 (1970), 15–38.

⁶H. Hunger, "Thukydides bei Johannes Kantakouzenos. Beobachtungen zur Mimesis," *JÖB* 25 (1976), 181–93.

⁷R. Scott, "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography," *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, University of Birmingham, Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies 1979 (Birmingham, 1981), 61–74.

that the distinctive feature of the *Alexiad*—as well as of many other Byzantine historical works—is the extent of the author's intrusion in the narration, the “personal concern” of the writer, her focus on the individual and family, and the use of historiography as individual and dynastic propaganda. There is no space here to discuss the correctness of this statement; what is of interest and importance is a goal of the scholar himself, that is, the goal of seeking out the special characteristics of Byzantine historiography.

No doubt this problem cannot be solved without linking it to the issue of continuity and discontinuity in Byzantine culture, the two main modern views on which are represented by A. Kazhdan and G. Weiss.⁸

Another problem to be discussed is genre of historiography. F. Winkelmann, in a paper written in his younger years, divided historiography into four subgenres: histories, chronicles, church histories, and hagiographical works.⁹ Hagiographical works must be excluded from the list because they form a special and separate literary genre; church history (to the study of which Winkelmann himself contributed much) existed mainly at the very beginning of the Byzantine era. But histories and chronicles—which I have discussed elsewhere¹⁰—are the subgenres I intend to briefly address here.

For K. Krumbacher, histories and chronicles were two separate branches of historiography, each with its own independent origin and with little interconnection to the other. Histories were supposed to have been written by educated authors in a classical manner and read by a tiny layer of classically educated persons, while chronicles were supposedly composed by unpretentious monks in a simple style and intended to be read by a simple sort of people.

This notion remained unchallenged until the 1960s, when H.-G. Beck in a brilliant paper showed that this view was speculative and without basis in the material.¹¹ Beck's arguments appeared to be incontrovertible, but the reaction of scholars was strange, to say the least. Some apparently took no notice of it at all; some approved it but nevertheless continued to divide historiography into two distinct branches. They appreciated Beck's view, but in their research continued to pursue the old route. So there has evolved a rather paradoxical situation: almost all the scholars have admitted in theory that historiography was a unity, but in practice cannot help separating it into histories and chronicles.¹²

In my opinion this situation has its roots not exclusively in the minds of scholars, but in reality itself. As I have tried to demonstrate in my papers mentioned above, the

⁸Kazhdan–Constable, *People and Power*, 117–39; G. Weiss, “Antike und Byzanz. Die Kontinuität der Gesellschaftsstruktur,” *HZ* 224 (1977), 529–60.

⁹F. Winkelmann, “Geschichtsschreibung in Byzanz,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Universität Rostock* 18 (1969), 475–81.

¹⁰See Ljubarskij, “Neue Tendenzen”; idem, “Ob evolutsii vizantijskoj istoriografii,” *Literatura i iskusstvo v sisteme kultury* (Moscow, 1988), 39–44; idem, “Sočinenije prodolžatelja Feofana, chronika, istorija, žizneopisanija?” in *Prodolžatel Feofana, Žizneopisanija vizantijskich zarej* (Moscow, 1992), 203.

¹¹H.-G. Beck, “Die byzantinische ‘Mönchschronik,’” in his *Ideen und Realitäten in Byzanz* (London, 1972), 188–97.

¹²Not to cite many works, see for instance M. J. Jeffreys, “The Attitudes of Byzantine Chroniclers towards Ancient History,” *Byzantion* 49 (1979), 199 ff; *The Chronicle of Theophanes. An English Translation of anni mundi 6095–6305 (A.D. 602–813)*, with Introduction and Notes by H. Turtledove (Philadelphia, 1982), x–xi; K. Snipes, “The Chronographia of Michael Psellos and the Textual Tradition and Transmission of the Byzantine Historians of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” *ZRVI* 27/28 (1989), 45 ff.

interconnection of these two subgenres is not static and unchangeable, but rather dialectical and dependent upon the historical period. Histories and chronicles existed in parallel only at the very beginning of Byzantine history until the so-called Dark Ages. After that histories disappeared but chronicles remained and began developing "in the direction of histories," and already in the tenth century some of them took the form of histories. Thus the great historical works of the eleventh, twelfth, and subsequent centuries were not mere repetitions or reconstructions of classical pieces of historiography (although direct influence cannot be excluded), but were the result of the evolution of Byzantine historiography itself. I do not know whether my suggestions are correct, but I am sure that both subgenres must be regarded not only in their existence as separate entities but in their controversial interconnection as well.

Such are the traditional problems concerning Byzantine historiography as they have been treated up to now. A few words about relatively modern issues. Since the 1960s some works have been published dealing with the world outlook and ideology of Byzantine authors, mostly from scholars with Marxist backgrounds or at least a Marxist education. (This can be easily understood because of the interest of Marxists in ideological problems.) Among these I would like to mention only the works by A. Kazhdan and G. Litavrin, because they both used the very productive method that can be designated as comparative analysis. It consists of the juxtaposition of the views of different writers and the comparison of their attitudes toward certain subjects. Such a method gives us a chance to define the peculiarities and originality of the historians—not often taken into consideration by modern scholars. Kazhdan used this method in reference to the composition of Michael Attaleiates, Litavrin in reference to Cecaumenos.¹³

Special note should be taken of the rather few works on the Byzantine philosophy of history. This topic, common enough in European medieval studies, has been very rarely discussed by Byzantinists. The reason is clear: the Byzantines did not have figures such as Augustine or Otto von Freisingen, for instance, and their views on history are supposed to be homogeneous and scarcely differentiated. This statement was questioned with regard to late historiography a quarter of a century ago by C. Turner, who argued that in the last centuries of Byzantium there existed three different directions in the philosophy of history: the traditional (Sphrantzes, Doukas), the radical (Chalcondyles, Critobulos, Plethon), and the middle-of-the-road (Manuel II, Scholarios). The main point of Turner's paper is the changeability and diversity of these approaches to history.¹⁴ Unfortunately, his line of research was hardly pursued by scholars; I can refer only to the paper of X. Khvostova, likewise devoted to the late period, but using the modern methods of statistical analysis, and two papers of my own.¹⁵

But the most significant trend in modern studies of historiography is, in my opinion, the gradual transition from pure *Quellenforschung* to the contextual (if I may call it this)

¹³ A. Kazhdan and S. Franklin, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge-Paris, 1984), 123 ff; *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena*, ed. G. Litavrin (Moscow, 1972), 62 ff.

¹⁴ C. Turner, "Pages from Late Byzantine Philosophy of History," *BZ* 57.2 (1964), 346–73.

¹⁵ X. Khvostova, "Filosofia istorii Grigory i Pachimera; sovremennaja informatika," *VizVrem* 46 (1986), 146–56; Ja. Ljubarskij, "Hommes, destinée, providence," in *La Philosophie grecque et sa portée culturelle et historique*, ed. A. Garzya (Moscow, 1985), 229–69; idem, "Vizantijcy o dvigateljach istorii," in *Obščestvennoe soznaniye na Balkanach v srednie veka* (Kalinin, 1982), 4–19.

investigation of Byzantine historical writings. This sort of investigation has resulted in the reevaluation of many pieces of historiography.

Here Byzantine chronicles provide the best example. No genre of Byzantine literature has ever been maligned and ridiculed as has that of chronicles. Their authors have been deemed dull and uneducated, their content banal and full of commonplaces, their style unskilled and feeble. Such a notion persisted until the present day, and even Hunger, despite his acute understanding of Byzantine literature, did not hesitate in his *Die hochsprachliche Profane Literatur der Byzantiner* to call chronicles "Trivalliteratur." But it has been precisely these chronicles that have been reevaluated the most during the last decades.

The impulse for this reevaluation came, as so often happens, from Western medieval scholars. One of them already some decades ago argued that even the most trivial of the chronicles was in some aspects superior to the histories written by the most educated authors.¹⁶ The main reason for such a paradoxical assertion was that any universal chronicler was supposed to be able to review the whole course of events of world history, while the historian could see only a small part. Moreover, instead of the cyclical scheme of historical development supposedly typical of classical historians, Christian chroniclers seemed to insist on the progressive advance of history from a fixed starting point to a final goal. I am not quite sure that this overestimation of chronicles was correct, but the humiliation to which this branch of historiography was subjected came to an end.

Although an acute Byzantine scholar, H. Gelzer, admitted early the importance of chronicles,¹⁷ the proper investigation of the genre began not so long ago. Only two papers (besides the chapter in Hunger's *Profane Literatur*) can pretend to have a theoretical approach to the subject. There is, first of all, the great article by five French authors published in *Travaux et Memoirs*.¹⁸ Strictly speaking, the authors deal with the *Chronicon Paschale*, but in reality they are concerned with chronography as a whole and especially stress the importance of chronography for the content, composition, literary form, and formation of the subgenre. The second article is by C. Mango, which is full of original—if debatable—thoughts worthy of special discussion.¹⁹

Much more numerous and significant are studies of single works of chronography. Much has been written in recent years, for instance, about John Malalas—one of the most "despised" chroniclers of early Byzantium. The focus on Malalas reached its climax after the publication of *Studies in John Malalas*, a large volume written by Australian Byzantinists²⁰ (who some years ago published the translation of his *Chronography* into English with a long commentary).²¹ Strictly speaking, the volume comprises a collection of different essays, but in fact is a thorough study of the Byzantine writer. Some chapters are rather traditional in content (e.g., "Malalas' Sources," "The Language of Malalas"), but the titles of the others presuppose a more modern approach ("Malalas' World

¹⁶J. Spörl, "Das mittelalterliche Geschichtsdnken als Forschungsaufgabe," in *Geschichtsdnken und Geschichtsbild im Mittelalter*, ed. W. Lammers (Darmstadt, 1961), 23 ff.

¹⁷H. Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie* (Leipzig, 1898), 97.

¹⁸J. Beaucamp et al., "Le prologue de la Chronique pascale," *TM* 7 (1979), 223–301.

¹⁹C. Mango, "The Tradition of Byzantine Chronography," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988–89), 360–72.

²⁰E. Jeffreys with B. Croke and R. Scott, *Studies in Malalas* (Sydney, 1990).

²¹*The Chronicle of John Malalas*, ed. E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, and R. Scott (Sydney, 1986).

View," "Malalas and his Contemporaries," etc.). And in some of the cases this presupposition really turned out to be the case. The main goal of the authors was to put the *Chronography* by Malalas in different "contexts": that of the genre (B. Croke assumes that a lot of other works very similar to the *Chronography* existed), contemporary literature (Scott argues the similarity of Malalas in many ways to such different writers as Procopius, Romanos Melodos, and others), Byzantine ideology (E. Jeffreys tries to present the world view of Malalas in the framework of Byzantine mentality), and so on. The validity of each of these viewpoints must be evaluated separately, but what is significant is the general trend of many of these papers, which not only put Malalas' work "in different contexts," but likewise stress the originality of the writer. To cite one of the authors: "Although Malalas' approach to his subject fits easily into contemporary context, he was nevertheless pursuing his own line with his own set of facts and interpretations."

Most of what I have just said about the study of Malalas concerns certain other chroniclers as well. George Syncellos, for instance, was considered by J. J. Scaliger as dull and stupid; even Gelzer was sure of his "Denkunfähigkeit." Until not very long ago the only work worth mentioning on the subject of George Syncellos was that of R. Laqueur in the *Real-Encyclopädie* of Pauly-Wissowa, but in the late seventies and eighties we have seen a sort of explosion of interest in Syncellos. G. Huxley,²² for example, claimed to reevaluate Syncellos' personality and praised his erudition. Some years later W. Adler went even further. In his recent book²³ he noted Syncellos' erudition and argued that, though he adapted and reshaped material from earlier works, Syncellos did not imitate, and in reality refuted their authors. Thus Syncellos in Adler's opinion turned out to be not only a learned but also an original writer.

Something similar happened to Theophanes the Confessor, who for a long time had been dismissed by scholars as a superficial compiler. But I. Čičurov, investigating just unoriginal parts of Theophanes' *Chronography*, managed to show the means Theophanes used to express his own attitudes and approaches.²⁴ The historian writing "on the edge of anonymity" turned out to be a personality with his own world outlook. In parallel with and after Čičurov's work other papers appeared in line with his opinion,²⁵ and P. Speck seems to have been the last scholar to assert that Theophanes' *Chronography* in its compiled part consists of disparate quotations not very carefully connected to one another.²⁶

The "rehabilitation" of the chronicle of George the Monk is found in an article by D. Afinogenov.²⁷ Even such a trivial chronographer (or rather copyist) as George Ced-

²²G. L. Huxley, "On the Erudition of George the Synkellos," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 81C, no. 6 (1981), 207–17.

²³W. Adler, *Time Immemorial: Archaic History and its Sources in Christian Chronography from Julius Africanus to George Syncellus* (Washington, D.C., 1990).

²⁴I. Čičurov, "Mesto 'Chronografii' Feofana v rannevizantijskoj istoriografičeskoj tradicii (IV-nač. IXv.)," in *Drevnejšije gosudarstva na territorii SSSR* (Moscow, 1981), 5–148.

²⁵See I. Rochow, "Malalas bei Theophanes," *Klio* 65.2 (1983), 459–74, and the literature mentioned in the article; idem, "Zwei Neuerscheinungen zur Chronik des Theophanes," *Klio* 67.2 (1985), 646–54.

²⁶P. Speck, *Kaiser Konstantin VI. Die Legitimation einer fremden und der Versuch einer eigenen Herrschaft. Quellenkritische Darstellung von 25 Jahren byzantinischer Geschichte nach dem ersten Ikonoklasmus*, I (Munich, 1978), 389 ff.

²⁷D. Afinogenov, "Kompozicija chroniki Georgija Amartola," *VizVrem* 52 (1991), 102–12.

renos has been recently deemed a renovator of historiographical tradition.²⁸ The tendency of scholars is evident.

The use of the method I have called here "contextual investigation" and the process of reevaluating works of historiography can be observed not only in the field of chronography. Two examples will suffice to support this statement. The first is Averil Cameron's book on Procopius.²⁹ Strange as it may seem, this book is the first monograph about Procopius written in this century. His writings, according to Cameron, have not been properly assessed because of the habit of modern philologists to regard the work of medieval writers exclusively with respect to genres. Procopius, the creator of the historical composition the *Wars*, the pamphlet the *Secret History*, and the rhetorical discourse *About Buildings*, had never been explored as an entity. His profile as a writer was separated into three distinct parts. So the authors of the *Wars*, *About Buildings*, and the *Secret History* seemed to be three different individuals. Overcoming this tradition, Cameron set out to evaluate Procopius' literary legacy as a "unified system" existing in the "contemporary context" of Byzantium of the sixth century (the word "context" has become fashionable nowadays among Byzantinists). She states: "The three works must be taken both singly and together and made to reveal their inner coherence and the principles on which they are constructed."³⁰

The second example is the paper by Kazhdan on John Kantakouzenos.³¹ His paper is remarkable in that he approaches the *History* by Kantakouzenos as a book of fiction. According to Kazhdan the writer's intrusion in the text, a process begun by Psellos, reached a peak in the work by Kantakouzenos. The writer became a sort of pivot uniting the historical material in the work. The reader, says Kazhdan, can find in the *History* a "spirit of tragedy," the "heroic spirit of the defeat," and so on. Such notions and vocabulary are much more common in literary criticism than in historical studies, but are we able to appreciate a historical work properly unless we take into account the artistic methods of its author?

It should be stressed that the problem of interconnection of fiction and history writing is now vividly discussed by scholars from the viewpoint of so-called theory of narrativity. In their opinion the only and not very important difference between the two is that the first deals with imaginary, the second with real events. The theory of narrativity is now being applied to medieval and even Byzantine historiography.³² Its application can be, in my opinion, of great use when nothing or very little is known about the authors of texts as well as about the circumstances of their creation and when traditional *Quellenforschung* does not bring sufficient results (chronography is the best example).

To sum up, I have mentioned certain books and papers which reflect, to my mind, modern trends in the approach to Byzantine historiography. To some extent they reflect new trends in Byzantine studies in general. To be sure I do not mean to imply that all

²⁸ R. Maisano, "Note su Giorgio Cedreno e la tradizione storiografica bizantina," *RSBS* 3 (1983), 227.

²⁹ Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1985).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

³¹ A. Kazhdan, "L'Histoire de Cantacuzene en tant qu'oeuvre littéraire," *Byzantion* 50 (1980), 279 ff.

³² H. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrativity*, ed. W. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981), 1–23. For attempts at the practical application of this method, see in *History as Text*, ed. A. Cameron (Duckworth, 1989). See also J. Haldon, "'Jargon' vs. 'the Facts'? Byzantine History-Writing and Contemporary Debates," *BMGS* 9 (1984–85), 117 ff.

the ideas expressed in the studies mentioned here are entirely persuasive and well founded, or that they are as “modern” as are, for instance, researches in the field of Western medieval or even ancient historiography. My only task has been to stress the new trends in this field, and I am quite sure of the future importance of these new approaches to Byzantine historical writings.

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